Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)

Report Part Title: Russia and geopolitical contestation in the Arctic
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Report Title: Navigating Breakup:
Report Subtitle: Security realities of freezing politics and thawing landscapes in the Arctic
Report Editor(s): Karsten Friis, Elana Wilson Rowe, Mike Sfraga, Ulf Sverdrup, Pavel K. Baev, Troy J. Bouffard, Marc Lanteigne, Marisol Maddox, Jan-Gunnar Winther
Published by: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) (2023)
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep47338.8

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3. Russia and geopolitical contestation in the Arctic

Pavel K. Baev (PRIO)

Moscow's evolving strategic approach to the region

The escalating confrontation between Russia and the West caused by the Ukraine war has profoundly affected the pattern of international interactions in the Arctic region, with Moscow now facing the need to re-evaluate its positions and policies. The proposition that the Arctic represents an area of unfolding geopolitical contestation has long been taken for granted in Russian political and strategic thinking, despite the rationale underlying this being poorly compatible with Russia's interests in expanding cooperation. The new Russian naval doctrine defines the Arctic seas as an area of vital interest and identifies any expansion of the US and NATO military presence there as a major threat with conflict potential.[42]

Typically, the main driver of this competition in the eyes of Russian policymakers is the Western desire to control natural resources, with the lack of any reliable estimates of this imagined 'treasure chest' serving to fuel such perceptions.[43] It was only at the start of the current decade that assessments of the fast-approaching 'green' energy transition started to enter Russian debates surrounding the geo-economics of the oil and gas industry. The Russian Foreign Ministry duly rejected the goal advanced by the new EU Arctic Policy (Joint Communication from October 2021) regarding a ban on the exploration and production of hydrocarbons in the High North. The 2022 naval doctrine ignores the prospect of Russian energy exports to Europe being interrupted and instead presumes there will be growth in the appetites of corporate giants such as BP or ExxonMobil to explore undiscovered offshore resources in the Arctic shelf, while at the same time a rise in the external threats to Russian control over the Northern Sea Route ('Sevmorput').

[42] President Putin approved this doctrine at the naval parade in St Petersburg on 31 July 2022 – the text is available on the presidential website at http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/69084.

[43] The main reference point in Russian discussions is the badly out-of-date estimate by the US Geological Survey from 2008; see USGS, 'Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle', 2008, https://pubs.er.usgs.gov/publication/fs20083049.

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The main variable in Russian assessments of Arctic contestation is, however, the military-strategic balance of forces, with energy-related references mostly added to camouflage this security-political calculus. Russian strategic culture is rigidly traditional in defining military force as the main instrument of policy. This thinking has driven many doctrinal guidelines for costly build-up in the High North, such as protecting the Northern Sea Route with a chain of bases designed more for air defence than search and rescue. Moscow's strategic outlook has evolved quickly since the beginning of Russian aggression towards Ukraine in 2014, with the full-scale war launched (to the surprise of much of Russia's senior leadership) on 24 February 2022 further accelerating this process. Although at time of writing Russia urgently needs to concentrate all its available resources on the Donbass battlegrounds, the Arctic theatre continues to occupy a prominent place in its strategic planning.[44] This sustained priority is partly down to the perceived necessity of responding to Finland and Sweden's ongoing accession to NATO, and partly due to the imperative of completing the costly programme Russia has embarked on to modernize its military assets and infrastructure, as envisaged by the 2027 State Armament Programme (SAP), approved in 2017.[45]

Military priorities and activities

The main justification for this Arctic regional strategic priority is the deployment of nuclear submarines, particularly strategic ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), on Russia's Kola Peninsula bases (primarily Gadzhievo), which also provide crucial logistic support for the Vidyaevo base on the Pacific-facing Kamchatka Peninsula. The Russian high command considers modernization of the sea leg of the strategic triad of pivotal importance, reflected in the fact that the construction of the new Borei-class series of SSBNs constitutes the single most expensive project in the 2027 SAP. The extraordinary feat of arms displayed by the simultaneous surfacing of three SSBNs in close proximity through Arctic ice near the North Pole on 25 March 2021 was intended to demonstrate a new high in terms of Russia's upgraded strategic capabilities.[46] However, a contrary perspective was provided by the explosion and fire on board the AS-31 (Losharik) deep-diving nuclear submarine on 1 July 2019, which resulted in 14 casualties. The accident once again drew international attention to the habitually negligent maintenance that has meant operating Russian nuclear assets carries inherently high risks.

The risks are even higher when it comes to testing new weapons systems. Although several of the failures when test-launching the intercontinental ballistic missile Bulava (the main weapon of the Borei-class submarines) were technical, an explosion during the recovery of

[44] E. Buchanan, 'The Ukraine war and the future of the Arctic', RUSI Commentary, 18 Mar. 2022, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraine-war-and-future-arctic.

[45] R. Connolly and M. Boulegue, Russia's New State Armament Programme: Implications for the Russian Armed Forces and Military Capabilities to 2027 (London: Chatham House, May 2018), www.chathamhouse.org/2018/05/russias-new-state-armament-programme.

[46] T. Nielsen, 'Three nuclear ballistic missile subs surfaced simultaneously through the ice in complex Russian arctic exercise', Barents Observer, 26 Mar. 2021, https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2021/03/three-russian-nuclear-ballistic-missile-subs-broke-through-ice-north-pole.

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a prototype of 9M730 Burevestnik missile on 8 August 2019 claimed five lives.[47] The design of this nuclear-powered cruise missile makes every test an experiment in crash-landing a nuclear reactor. Even so, preparations for a new launch were detected on the Novaya Zemlya test site in summer 2021.[48] Another dubious weapons system presented by President Putin in his address to the Federal Assembly in May 2018 was the nuclear-powered unmanned long-range underwater vehicle *Poseidon* (Status-6), which is yet to be tested, though the carrier submarine K-329 *Belgorod* was commissioned to the Northern Fleet in July 2022.[49]

Much like at the zenith of the Cold War, the heavy concentration of Russian nuclear weapons systems, warheads and infrastructure on the Kola Peninsula necessitates the building of conventional forces capable of protecting these valuable assets. Unlike in the Soviet military organization, however, the Northern Fleet now has responsibility for building all the elements and units of this armed forces grouping, with its command granted the status of a separate military district since January 2021. The deployment of new surface-to-air (S-400) and anti-ship (SM22 Tsirkon) missiles has made possible a re-conceptualizing of the Soviet 'Bastion' proposition aimed at turning the Barents Sea into an area where SSBNs can safely operate.[50] The emphasis on denying NATO air and naval forces effectual access to this area is comparable to the US A2/AD concept, even if the Russian command has inferior capacity to integrate weapons systems of different types.[51] A key feature of the modernized Russian 'Bastion' is enhanced capabilities for projecting power on shore through long-range missile strikes combined with air assaults, prepared by such exercises as the mock attacks on the Globus II radar site at Vardø.[52]

A new and demanding challenge for the Northern Fleet is protecting the vast littoral to the east of Novaya Zemlya, including supplying the chain of new bases established along the Sevmorput. None of the surface combatants in the fleet's combat order are suitable for ice conditions, and the newly-built diesel icebreaker Ilya Muromets can provide only limited support, particularly during difficult periods, such as the 2021 and 2022 navigation seasons. Russian official sources have circulated 'rumours' about detaching assets from the Northern Fleet military district (which does not include such bases as Temp on Kotelny Island) to establish a new Arctic Fleet.[53] Given the shortage of ice-class ships (and the priority placed on constructing submarines), such plans appear far-fetched. Instead, the fast-deepening deficit of

47 M. Krutov, S. Dobryni and M. Eckel, 'Did a botched bid to recover a sunken missile cause the Russian radiation blast?', RFE/RL, 30 Aug. 2019, www.rferl.org/a/russia-radiation-explosion-sunken-missile-investigation-nyonoksa/30138178.html.

48 T. Nielsen, 'Russia readies Burevestnik testing at Novaya Zemlya', Barents Observer, 19 Aug. 2021, https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2021/08/russia-readies-burevestnik-testing-novaya-zemlya.

49 H. I. Sutton, 'Russia's gigantic submarine, Belgorod, sails for the first time', Naval News, 25 June 2022, www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/06/russias-gigantic-submarine-belgorod-sails-for-the-first-time/.

50 M. Boulegue, Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic (London: Chatham House, 2019), www.chathamhouse.org/2019/06/russias-military-posture-arctic/2-perimeter-control-around-bastion.

51 M. Kofman, 'It's time to talk about R2/RD: Rethinking the Russian military challenge', War on the Rocks, 5 Sep. 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/its-time-to-talk-about-a2-ad-rethinking-the-russian-military-challenge/.

52 T. Nielsen, '11 Russian fighter jets made mock attack on Norwegian Arctic radar', Barents Observer, 12 Feb. 2019, https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2019/02/11-russian-fighter-jets-made-mock-attack-norwegian-arctic-radar.

53 'Russia looks into Navy Arctic Fleet creation', TASS, 7 Oct. 2021, https://tass.com/defense/1346611.

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resources, including manpower, means strategic ambitions for expanding military control over the High North will almost certainly need to be curtailed.

Rather than expanding its area of operations eastward, the Northern Fleet would apparently prefer to focus on the more familiar task of confronting the occasionally gathered NATO and US Navy forces in the Barents Sea and further west and south towards the Greenland–Iceland–UK gap.[54] The fleet has experimented with various methods of interfering with NATO exercises in the Norwegian and Barents seas, from staging missile launches from combat ships inside the exercise area to jamming GPS signals.[55] Despite frequent exaggeration of the extent of NATO activities, which are traditionally presented as threatening Russia's interests, the Northern Fleet command – as well as the high command in Moscow – has in reality had good reason to be confident given its numerical force superiority in the Kola Peninsula and qualitative edge in modern weapons. However, this habitual position of power (which has failed to yield any tangible political dividends) has weakened in light of many Northern Fleet assets being redeployed to the Black Sea theatre. Meanwhile, the North European states have increased investments in defensive capabilities and expanded military cooperation. Consequently, Moscow opted not to counter in any forceful way the 'Cold Response 2022' exercise by NATO forces in Norway in March–April 2022.[56]

Diplomatic interconnections

These security dynamics have undercut Moscow's diplomatic activities concerning the Arctic region, which used to combine stern *démarches* – such as the pressure exerted on Norway regarding the execution of its sovereignty over Svalbard – with initiatives for reviving cross-border cooperation.[57] The Kremlin placed particular importance on Russia's chairmanship of the Arctic Council in 2021–2023, intending to make a success of this rare opportunity to shape the agenda of an esteemed international institution, which brings Russia together with seven Western states. Military security matters are traditionally excluded from Arctic Council deliberations, but Russian aggression against Ukraine compelled the Western member states to pause participation in the full scope of activities.[58] In the absence of Russian contributions and engagement, Moscow regards cooperative undertakings in such crucial areas as environment and climate as making little sense, and indeed the future of the Arctic Council remains uncertain.

[54] D. B. Larter, 'The US Navy returns to an increasingly militarized Arctic', Defense News, 12 May 2020, www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/05/11/the-us-navy-returns-to-an-increasingly-militarized-arctic/.

[55] P. B. Danilov, 'GPS jamming still causing problems in Finnmark', High North News, 26 June 2020, www.highnorthnews.com/en/gps-jamming-still-causing-problems-finnmark.

[56] Q. Lawrence, 'NATO troops conducted a routine war exercise in the Arctic. This year felt different', NPR, 15 Apr. 2022, www.npr.org/2022/04/15/1091492248/nato-arctic-war-game-had-a-cold-war-feel.

[57] A. Staalsen, 'An apparently coordinated Russian response challenges Norway's position on Svalbard', ArcticToday, 6 July 2020, www.arctictoday.com/an-apparently-coordinated-russian-response-challenges-norways-position-in-svalbard/.

[58] D. McVicar, 'How the Russia–Ukraine War Challenges Arctic Governance', Council on Foreign Relations, 10 May 2022, www.cfr.org/blog/how-russia-ukraine-war-challenges-arctic-governance; and N. Vyakhireva, 'On pause: Dialogue with Russia in the Arctic", Valdai Discussion Club, 20 Apr. 2022, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/on-pause-dialogue-with-russia-in-the-arctic-/.

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Conclusion

For years, Russia's Arctic policy developed on two poorly compatible tracks: engagement in international cooperation and the building-up of military capabilities. Currently, both tracks have hit a dead end. Moscow can neither allocate the resources necessary for planned modernization of its nuclear and conventional assets, nor cultivate ties with Western neighbours. Russian leadership expected to score a quick victory in the war against Ukraine, which the West would have to accept as a *fait accompli*, enforcing only symbolic sanctions, as in 2014–2015, when Arctic cooperation was barely affected. The protracted war has derailed these Russian plans, and the consequences for Arctic security could be grave.[59] Russia's capacity for launching and sustaining large-scale conventional military operations in the Arctic theatre has diminished, but the urge to put nuclear instruments into political play has increased. Moscow tends to regard its readiness to take risks that are perceived as unacceptable by NATO policymakers and military planners as a strategic advantage. This brinksmanship signifies that any major nuclear incident, for instance a failed test of the Burevestnik missile or the *Poseidon* underwater drone, accompanied by the usual attempts to hide the data on the damage, would produce a major Arctic security crisis. The pattern of mutual restraint in the High North still holds, despite the fiasco of Russia's chairmanship in the Arctic Council, but every setback in the Ukraine war changes the rationality of decision-making in the Kremlin, and it is in the Arctic that NATO deterrence can be tested.

[59] I. B. Friedman, 'After Ukraine, can the Arctic peace hold?', Foreign Policy, 4 Apr. 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/04/arctic-council-members-russia-boycott-ukraine-war/.

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